

INDOCHINA

The Last Year of the War

Communist Organization and Tactics

Bernard B. Fall

The views expressed in this article are the author's and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army or the Command and General Staff College.—The Editor.

WHEN on 7 May 1954, at about 1900, Platoon Commander Chu Ba The of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) planted the red flag with the gold star of the Communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) atop the headquarters bunker of Dien Bien Phu, a new era opened in Asian warfare. An army that had begun its existence 10 years ago as a small guerrilla force had annihilated in open combat the cream of a well-trained Western army equipped with nearly all modern implements of war short of atomic weapons.

This Communist victory had its roots in two different sets of reasons. One set of reasons is inherent to the terrain and to the People's Army itself—its organization, training, and tactics. These will be the subject of the present article. The other set of reasons is imputable to the tactics of the French Union Forces during the last year of the war. They will

be discussed in a subsequent article, to be published in the December issue of the **MILITARY REVIEW**. Both articles together should give a picture of the interplay of those various factors and their eventual effect upon the outcome of the war.

The VPA is composed of three different combat echelons. The hard core of the VPA is composed of its approximately 10 regular divisions—9 infantry and 1 "heavy" artillery and engineering division (see Figures 1 and 2). They are known as the Main Force (*chu luc*). It is they who bore the brunt of all major operations between 1950 and 1954: the border offensive of 1950, the 1952 offensives into northwestern Vietnam, the stabs into Laos in 1953, and, finally, the liquidation of the airhead of Dien Bien Phu. The *chu luc* units of the VPA are well-equipped and its infantry battalions had a distinct superiority in firepower—particularly in the field of 81-mm and 122-mm mortars—over the opposing French units.

Not all regular units operated along the main battlelines. For example, during 1953 and 1954 a sizable part of the 320th Infantry Division, VPA, along with the 42d, 46th, and 50th independent regiments, operated well within the French Union

Efficient Communist guerrilla warfare behind the French Union lines had weighted the scales of war heavily in favor of the VPA prior to Dien Bien Phu, and even before the development of the Navarre Plan

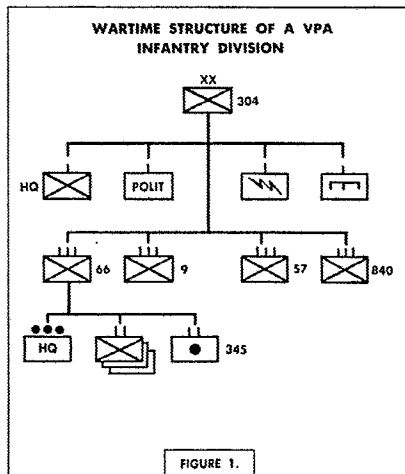
lines in support of regional and semi-mobile militia battalions (*Tieu-Doan Tap Trung Tinh*). Those regional units form the second-echelon troops. They have neither the training nor the equipment for large-scale maneuvering, but their superior knowledge of the terrain makes them extremely useful as scouting or screening units for infiltrated regular units.

Lastly, the third combat echelon was

chief of the VPA since its inception, openly declared that: "The military is the [Communist] Party's essential arm for the attainment of any political aim."

There exist cells of the Vietnam *Dang Lao-Dong*—the "Labor Party" which succeeded the Indochinese Communist Party in 1951—in every VPA platoon. At platoon level there are "political agents" reporting on all signs of political weakness to their own political commissar (*Chinh Uy*) who is attached to every unit at battalion level and above.

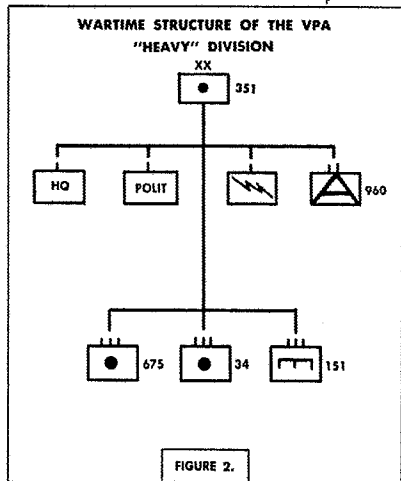
The political commissars of the VPA have far-reaching powers even in the field of military strategy and tactics. A DRVN decree of 1950 created "Front Command Committees with Political Preponderance"



composed of the locally raised militia units (*du-kich*). It is the *du-kich*, unrecognizable because they wear no uniforms and continue to live in their native villages to take up arms for a specific mission only, who do most of the communications sabotage, local espionage, sniping, reconnoitering, and who, in the past, often fought costly rear-guard actions to permit the escape of cornered regular units.

VPA and Communist Party

As a glance at an organization chart of the VPA shows (see Figure 3), the political control apparatus within the VPA is extremely important. Indeed, General Vo Nguyen Giap, the DRVN Vice Premier, Minister of Defense, and commander in

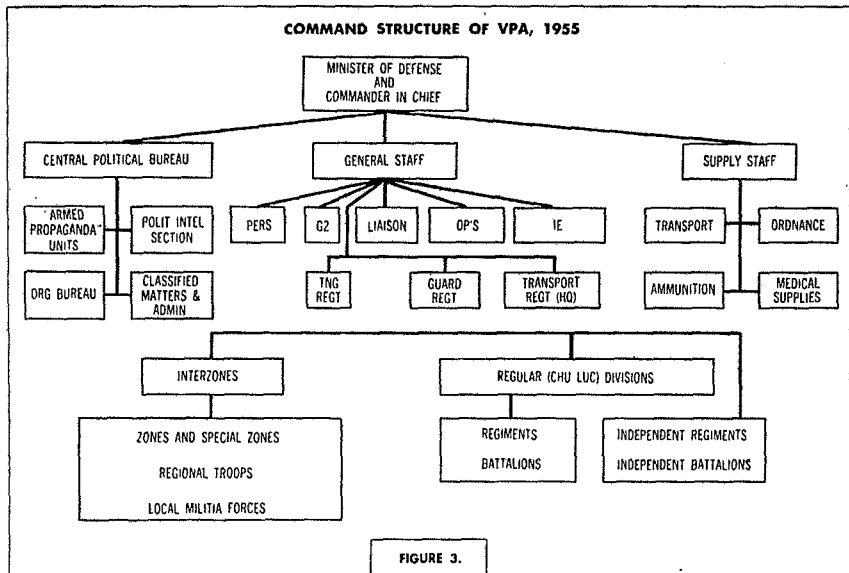


in which the views of the political commissar on a given tactical situation prevail over those of the military commander and deputy commander of the unit. It is obvious that under such conditions the VPA military commander is little more than a tool of his own political machine, with little chance of deviating from a given line. However, frictions between the political commissars and the military com-

manders occur. The author spoke in 1953 to a Communist officer who had deserted from the VPA side after *successful* completion of an operation, because he had been criticized in front of his troops by the commissar for "errors" he allegedly had committed.

This constant political indoctrination has made over the VPA soldier from an

units of the VPA, in the militia forces as well as among the regulars. "Death Volunteer" units whose members would throw themselves with a load of explosives, "kamikaze" fashion, against a French tank or against the firing slits of bunkers, proved particularly effective in attacks against fortified positions and were difficult to neutralize. Feats of the



illiterate peasant into an efficient fighting machine, much in the fashion of the Chinese Communist as described in a thorough study by L. M. Chassin, the former Commanding General of the French Far Eastern Air Force:

In the day's work of the Red soldier, the Marxist political lesson plays as important a part as the arms manual. Taken in hand by intelligent leaders, the armed peasant rapidly becomes a fanatic, an apostle of the new religion.¹

This fanaticism could be found in many

General L. M. Chassin, *La Conquête de la Chine* par Mao Tse-tung, Payot, Paris, 1951, pp 232-33

"Death Volunteers," along with others emphasizing strict obedience to orders, are often played up in DRVN propaganda to its troops, such as the following incident:

During the attack against the French post of Vinh Trach, the comrade company commander gave an order to the comrade in charge of the BAR to rise and to fire upon the blockhouse. The comrade rose immediately although he was to be sacrificed before he could even fire a shot.

It is obvious that Western fighting methods are not particularly well-adapted to cope with an enemy using such tactics, and

until the end of the war in Indochina, French unit commanders throughout Indochina were haunted by the problem of having to cope with a "Death Volunteers" attack.

VPA Tactics—1953-54

In October 1950, at the end of the first Communist offensive which had cost the French their string of forts along the Chinese border, General Giap held a staff study with the political commissars of the VPA's crack 98th Infantry Regiment, in the course of which he developed the outline of the operation he was going to fight so successfully over the next 4 years:

During the first and second phase we gnawed away at the forces of the enemy, in the third phase we must annihilate them. . . .

In order to pass over to the general counteroffensive (GCO) the following conditions must be met:

Superiority of our forces over those of the enemy.

The international situation must be to our advantage.

The [local] situation must evolve in our favor.

. . . we shall benefit from foreign aid in order to pass over to the GCO [but]

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merely to count upon such help would be proof of subjectivism and light-mindedness.

. . . other factors may also play in our favor: [French] difficulties in political, economic, or financial matters; protest movements against the war in the [French and Vietnamese Nationalist] army and among the people.

When we shall have reached the third phase, we shall use the following tactical principles to fulfill our strategic mission:

Mobile war, as principal activity.

Guerrilla war, as a secondary activity.

Positional warfare, also secondary.

The counteroffensive phase:

. . . the third phase may last over an extended period because we need time, but our possibilities in receiving aid from abroad will also be quite extensive.

It might be considered a tribute to Giap's remarkable military acumen—he is a French-educated high school professor with a Ph.D. in history and no formal military training—that he was able to carry through his plan to the last iota in less than 4 years. On the other hand, it must surprise the military reader that the French High Command—which had been in possession of Giap's plan since late 1952, when a copy of it was captured by French paratroop raiders—had in no appreciable way reacted to meet the new challenge.

With clockworklike precision, Giap now began to eliminate all threats to his rear areas. The end of 1950 saw all of north-eastern Vietnam outside of the Red River Delta in Giap's hands. A solid link with his main training and supply bases in Red China was now established. Night after night, hundreds of trucks now brought the long-awaited modern equipment for the GCO, as well as thousands of Red Chinese instructors and specialists from other Communist countries. The year

1951 brought Marshal Jean de Lattre de Tassigny as French commander in chief to Indochina and with him a series of sharp defeats for Giap.² But Giap's green *chu luc* regulars learned from their own defeats: Direct attacks against the fortified "De Lattre Line" of bunkers and blockhouses were abandoned in favor of a thorough political and guerrilla infiltration of the delta, while the main forces of Giap proceeded to further consolidate their hold upon northern Laos and the tribal Thai territory of North Vietnam.

On 11 October 1952 three VPA divisions once more crossed the Red River, destroyed the small French garrisons covering the hill line between the Red and Black Rivers, and reached the latter on 23 October after a forced march of more than 60 miles through thick jungle. A French airborne counterstab against the enemy communications hub of Yen Bay, followed by a tank-supported overland operation, was disregarded by Giap as being basically too weak to endanger his movement toward Laos.

After an initial attempt at attacking frontally the newly fortified French airhead at Na-San failed, Giap simply bypassed the position, leaving to the French Air Force the burdensome task of providing logistical support for a 12,000-man force uselessly bottled up 150 miles behind enemy lines. He continued his sweep forward, occupying the then unimportant and undefended position of Dien Bien Phu, until early in January 1953 when he reached his line of departure for the first Communist offensive into Laos. In the meantime, the VPA's guerrillas behind French lines had not remained inactive.

Communist Guerrilla Tactics

In Indochina prevalent types of terrain have brought about four major types of guerrilla warfare: urban terrorism; rice field and swamp warfare; hill and mountain warfare; and jungle warfare.

Of the four, the first is in no way different from similar operations in other parts of the world. In Vietnam it was particularly effective in view of the latent sympathies of a large part of the population with the terrorists, providing them with shelter and intelligence. Particularly well-conceived operations include the sabotaging of the Hanoi electrical plant by a group of saboteurs posing as repairmen, and the destruction in the spring of 1954 of nearly 40 planes—the Communists claim 62—on the Cat Bi, Do Son, and Gia-Lam airbases of North Vietnam by guerrilla demolition squads.

The second type of guerrilla warfare, fought in the marshy and waterlogged rice flatlands which include nearly all of Vietnam's populated areas, large cities, and major communications lines, can be considered as the "local speciality," and is radically different from any of the guerrilla tactics thus far described in available United States Army Field Manuals.

Throughout most of the Vietnamese flatlands—and also those of much of China, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma—communications are limited to the tops of dikes of different construction, with the smallest barely wide enough for a column marching single file, while the largest often may carry a double track motor highway or railroad. Such communications lines proved to be the number one target of Communist guerrillas in Indochina. Their success in either destroying them or in maintaining them in a constant state of insecurity robbed the French Union Forces of nearly one-third of their combat personnel, not to speak of the gigantic effort it required from the engineering and signal units diverted from other tasks to road and telegraph line rebuilding.

Guerrilla attacks in Vietnam, however, were not limited to the roads themselves but also included the convoys that circulated on them. Ambushes generally took place (see Figure 4) in an open stretch

² "Indochina—the Seven-Year Dilemma." *Military Review*, October 1953, p. 28

of field broken by some bushes or hedges, or an old pagoda. Hand-triggered mines were used to disable the lead vehicle, thus immobilizing the convoy. The rear-guard vehicle was dealt with similarly, or was destroyed by rocket launcher (bazooka) or mortar fire. Once the convoy is pinned down, the stage is set for its general attack.

According to American practice in such a case—which was also French practice in the early stages of the war—the escorting

themselves and to concentrate the fire of the heavy weapons of the convoy on major enemy targets while radioing for help. Air support in such cases proved particularly effective, since the enemy generally was deployed in a clearly defined target area. Counterattacking a Communist ambush with infantry forces of the convoy itself was considered as costly and of little value since every dike provided a natural covering position for retreating enemy forces. In clement weather, helicopters and light

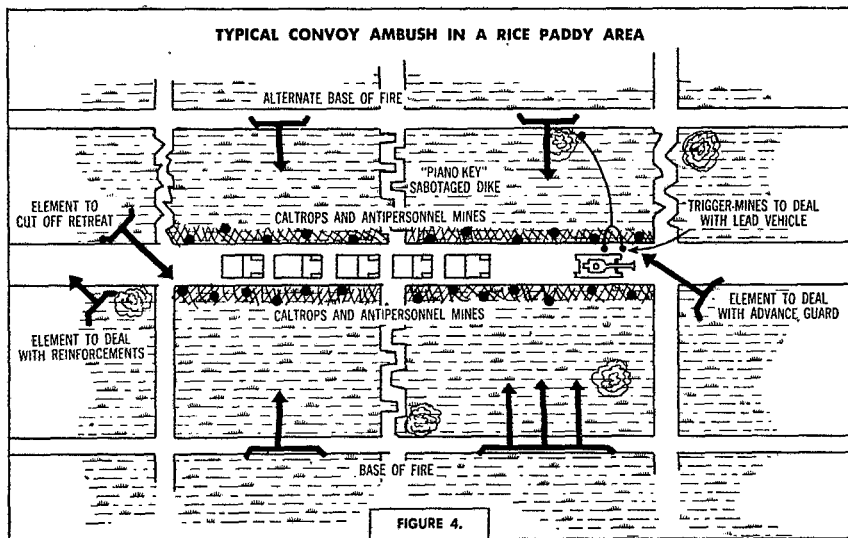


FIGURE 4.

units of the convoy detrucked and took cover in the road ditch opposite to the apparent line of enemy fire. In Vietnam such a procedure usually led the detrucked unit into terrain that was either mined or heavily spiked with caltrops of a crude but very effective model (see Figure 5), and also exposed to enemy fire from a secondary base. If panic ensued, the convoy usually could be considered a total loss.

It became French standard practice to take cover atop the dike under the vehicles

planes flying as convoy scouts proved effective in foiling ambushes; however, this was only possible in view of the fact that the enemy in Indochina had no air force of his own and, until Dien Bien Phu, was not believed to possess an effective anti-aircraft artillery.

Hill and mountain guerrilla warfare was widely practiced by Communist units in the tribal Thai areas and in Laos. The terrain most suitable for such operations is that covered with 6-foot tall "elephant grass." As in the case of jungle warfare,

units generally had to progress single file and thus were unable to bring their weapons to bear upon an enemy only yards away. In such terrain, air reconnaissance was well-nigh useless, unless the aircraft hovered practically at grass-top level, in which case it was extremely vulnerable even to small-arms fire. The usual counter-measure against that type of ambush was to avoid beaten paths wherever possible, and to have a light scouting screen deployed on both sides of the column. However, only larger columns have the necessary manpower to do so, and since the scouts then must hack their own path through the brush, the risk of losing them piecemeal may outweigh that of progressing in a body. The best method seems to be to separate the column into several elements sufficiently apart to make their falling together into an ambush unlikely, while still being close enough to each other for mutual support in the case of an attack against one of the column elements.

Jungle warfare in Indochina followed the usual rules with which American forces in Burma and the Pacific became familiar during World War II. Perhaps it may be useful to stress here again the overwhelming ineffectualness of combat airpower in that type of operation. Roads hacked in the jungle by thousands of Communist slave laborers over a distance of more than 300 miles supplied the four VPA divisions operating in the Dien Bien Phu area with probably more than 100 tons of ammunition and food a day.

In spite of total French mastery of the air, French air reconnaissance photographs throughout the entire Indochina war told an eloquent story of the capacity of the Communist logistical system to switch rapidly from truck convoys to hundreds of human porters. When three regular VPA divisions broke through 200 miles of jungle in less than 15 days in January 1954 and cut Indochina in two for nearly 2 weeks, they did so *without*

using a single motor vehicle, but were supported by a logistical lifeline of coolies stretching all the way from the Thai border back to the hills of South China. In the words of a French officer:

Not even an atom bomb could have helped us; assuming that it would have hit one of their coolie trails, they would merely have bypassed 'ground zero' and hacked themselves a new path through the jungle.

However, the type of political-military guerrilla warfare fought by the Commu-

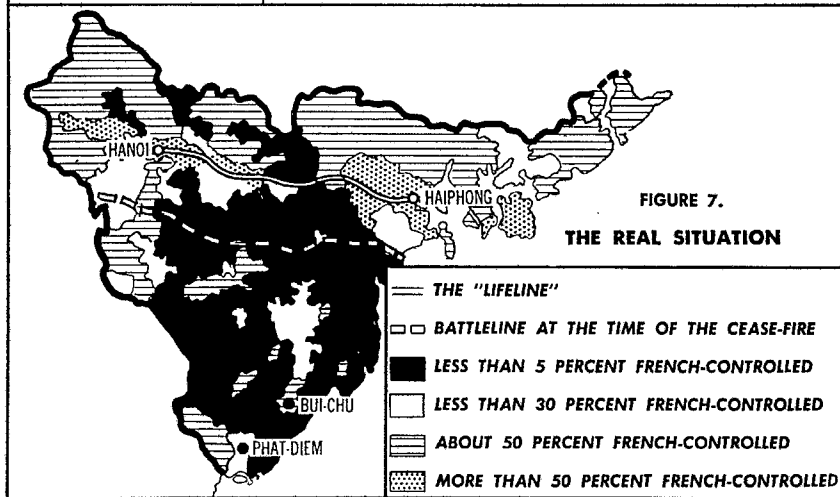
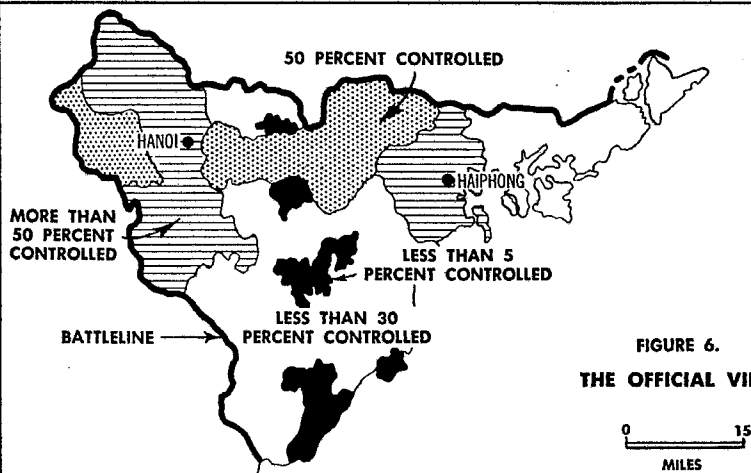


nists within the main French Union position, the Red River Delta, proved to be the operation that, more than Dien Bien Phu, finally broke the back of the French war effort in Indochina. As the author has stated elsewhere:

Depleted of their best troops for the sake of Dien Bien Phu, the French garrisons in the delta now had to face the brutal reality that their high command had refused to face for the past 5 years; the fact that it was the adversary who had effective control of most of the Red River Delta.

Figures 6 and 7 show clearly what is meant by this statement. Figure 6 shows

VIETMINH GUERRILLA INFILTRATION BEHIND FRENCH LINES SITUATION MAY 1953



At no time did the French succeed in wiping out the guerrilla threat in their own backyard. This is why the entire southern part of the Red River Delta, with the Catholic bishopries of Bui-Chu and Phat-Diem, had to be abandoned after the loss of Dien Bien Phu freed another 40,000 Communist soldiers for an all-out attack against the French Hanoi-Haiphong "lifeline."

in black the areas within the delta which the French Command acknowledged, 1 year before Dien Bien Phu, to be Communist-controlled in the military sense, although other large areas were admittedly "safe" only during daytime. Figure 7 was made by the author after careful research in the same area at the same time, backed by interviews of local French military and Vietnamese civilian officials. All agreed that the area actually under the *administrative* control of the Communists, that is, the area where they collected the taxes, ran the village government, and indoctrinated the children in the schools, was far greater than the extent of VPA military control.

It is worthy of note that precisely the southern area of the Red River Delta which already was so heavily infiltrated in 1953 was the first to be evacuated by the French when, after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, they began to retreat toward the Hanoi-Haiphong "lifeline," with 80,000 to 100,000 Communist guerrillas swarming around them, sabotaging their supply lines and attacking their convoys. By then the French within the delta were, in the apt image of a French officer, like *des grumeaux dans la soupe*—"breadcrumbs in the soup"—and fighting degenerated into a series of small-size Dien Bien Phus as French garrisons desperately fought their way out of trap after trap in an effort to keep their communications lines open.

In other words, efficient Communist guerrilla warfare behind French Union lines had already weighted the scales of war heavily in favor of the VPA before Dien Bien Phu, and even before the development of the Navarre Plan.

It but remains to attempt to draw some general conclusions from the way the Communist Vietminh fought its war against the French in Indochina. From the overall point of view, the VPA command has not evolved any particular tactical formula that had not already been field-tested by the Chinese Communists in their fight against the Chinese Nationalist forces of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.³

However, they have successfully adapted those general principles to local conditions and have made best use of their basic weakness in heavy equipment by simply transferring the entire war to a level of fighting which largely nullified the French weapons monopoly in the field of aviation or armor. The danger of the West's simply "pricing" itself out of the field of conventional warfare by an overreliance upon superweapons must be faced and met today from Korea to Indochina, and from Egypt to Algeria. Experience shows that a series of brush fires is harder to combat than one single major blaze—and one may be just as deadly as the other.

³ Lieutenant Colonel Robert B. Rigg, "Red Parallel: The Tactics of Ho and Mao," *The Army Combat Forces Journal*, January 1956.

In Indochina, the French made a 3 July 1953 Declaration of Independence for the Associated States of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Today, these states and the French are taking practical steps to make that independence a reality. The United States rejoices at this development. At the same time, we have pointed out to the leaders of the Associated States that they could scarcely hope to preserve their independence in isolation. Economically, politically, militarily, they would, at first, be weak and dangerously exposed. The French Union, like the British Commonwealth, could be a framework within which independence and interdependence can find voluntary expression.

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles